School Attendance Playbook:
Part 2: Promoting Positive Student Attendance
Winter 2023-24

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Office of Education

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Welcome to Part 2 of the School Attendance Playbook

As one semester ends and a new one begins, school districts and systems continue to incorporate innovative approaches to enhance student outcomes. Part 1 of the School Attendance Playbook provided valuable insights and resources to promote effective services and best practices in bolstering attendance efforts.

As we continue to strive in gathering pertinent information on addressing attendance concerns, Part 2 of our Playbook will focus on assisting school systems with support in navigating school attendance during the spring semester.

This segment delves into this critical realm of school attendance while also exploring multifaceted aspects that shape students' educational journeys. Attendance is not merely a numerical record but a pivotal factor influencing academic success, social development, and overall well-being. In this second part, educators will find invaluable insights and practical strategies to address attendance challenges, foster a culture of engagement, and ultimately enhance the learning experience for every student. From understanding the root causes of absenteeism to applying relevant interventions, Part 2 aims to equip educators with the knowledge and tools necessary to cultivate a school environment where attendance is not just a statistic but a gateway to a brighter educational future.

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School closures and the loss of social connections, attendance habits and routines, along with mental health challenges, and school avoidance exacerbated by the pandemic have contributed to a significant increase in student absences, as well as declines in wellbeing, educational engagement and achievement. To begin to reverse these patterns, schools can take several supportive measures in collaboration with students and their families:

Mental Health Support: Schools can prioritize mental health by offering counseling services, mental health awareness programs, and fostering a supportive and stigma-free environment. Students facing mental health issues are more likely to attend school when they feel their emotional well-being is recognized and supported.

Individualized Plans: For students exhibiting school avoidance behavior, schools can develop individualized attendance support plans that take into account the identified needs and concerns and coordinate efforts with parents/caregivers, youth, and supportive adults on campus.

Flexible Learning Options if needed/ possible: COVID-19 emphasized the need for flexible learning arrangements. Schools can offer remote or hybrid learning options for students, when possible, who may have health and mental health concerns.

Collaborative Problem-Solving: Schools can work collaboratively with students and families to identify the underlying causes of absences, whether they stem from mental health issues or COVID-related concerns. This collaboration can lead to creative solutions to ensure students remain engaged with their education.

Practical Solutions to Stabilize Students in their Learning Environment

Communication: Establishing open lines of communication between schools, students, and their families is essential. Regular check-ins and updates can help identify problems early and provide necessary support. Strategies to improve communication with families will be highlighted in the next section, *Effective Communication to Strive for Excellence.*

Community Resources: Schools can connect students and families with on and off campus community resources, such as mental health services, that can provide additional support and interventions.

Inclusivity and Understanding: Creating a compassionate and understanding school environment is essential. Students and their families need to feel that they belong and that their unique circumstances are acknowledged and respected.

By acknowledging and addressing the impact of mental health, school avoidance behavior, and the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student attendance, schools can take proactive steps to support students' well-being and educational progress. Working closely with students and their families to find solutions that fit their specific needs is crucial to ensuring that students continue to engage in their education, even in the face of challenging circumstances.
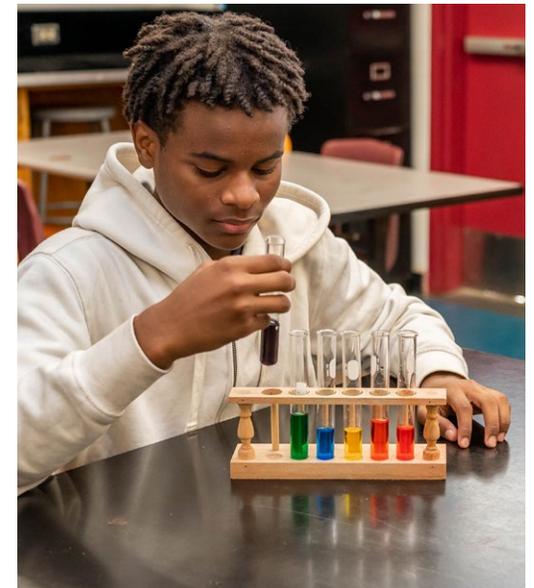
EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TO STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE

Communication for Excellence: Best Practices

In Part I of the Attendance Playbook, we discussed best practices when communicating with all education partners. Districts with low chronic absenteeism rates anticipate and prevent attendance dips through communication. This communication starts at the beginning of the year when Districts outline attendance expectations, provide families with an annual calendar, and encourage vacations to align with school breaks. If travel cannot be avoided, Districts may also offer alternatives such as short-term independent study. These messages and resources are provided on multiple platforms.

It is also important to consider the accessibility and aesthetics of communications. Some messages get lost when they are too wordy or too busy. In fact, visual aids or infographics are often more effective than words. It is essential that communication is kept simple and accessible. We have included some examples of attendance talking points that were created for various audiences by the San Diego County Office of Education.

Communication for Excellence: Best Practices

More important than aesthetics in communication is the clarity and consistency of the actual message being conveyed and whom it is intended to reach. We often find that messaging is not aligned or shared amongst all educational partners. Reflecting on the adage "if you aim at nothing, you hit nothing" is the best way to describe the outcome when our goals are not communicated to all education partners.

It is essential for LEAs to assess if their school community has a clear understanding of their shared attendance goals and vision.

Below are some questions to ask your Attendance Team:

- Do we have a positive attendance goal, beyond perfect attendance? This recognition can be inclusive of "improved" or "good" attendance.

- When discussing our attendance goals, is it clear to all students and families how many days they can miss a year and still hit our goal/have excellent attendance? How is this information shared with parents on a regular basis?

- Do all educational partners know excellent attendance is 96% of the total school days?

- Do faculty and staff know this goal as well?

- Do students and parents receive information regularly about their attendance and how close they are to our attendance goal?

- Do all partners understand how many absences put students into the chronic absenteeism category?

- Are parents/guardians/caregivers recognized for supporting regular, on-time student attendance?

When communicating, we should also examine how often our communications are one-way and the limitations of such communications in relation to our overall goals. There are times when **two-way communication** is not necessary; however, here are some benefits of reciprocal communication:

- Encourages engagement and participation

- Allows for assessment and checking for understanding

- Proactively limits miscommunication

- Solicits feedback for improvement

- Confirms and identifies who received the communication

Communication for Excellence: Best Practices

It is also essential to consider the tone of the message when communicating with our families. One must consider first, prior interactions. It is often reported by parents that the first form of communication regarding absences is often presumptuous, negative, or threatening. It is best practice to communicate with the families routinely. Moreover, communication should include positive reports throughout the year, and when there has been improvement. When discussing absences specifically, families should have already had various forms of communication regarding prevention prior to individualized intervention communication. Here is an outline example of a positive tier I prevention messaging.

Communication should also be judgement-free and helpful; Sometimes when families are in crisis or have had a significant life changing event (e.g., deportation, death, illness, incarceration, eviction, housing insecurity, divorce, etc.) for various reasons, their attention to school procedures may be temporarily impacted or diminished. This does not mean that the parent is apathetic or devalues education. This may, however, indicate that the parent is not comfortable sharing the information, or may not see the school as a resource, or consider them part of their community or safety net in the event of a crisis.

Below are some strategies to build relationships to ensure that parents see their child's school as a safe and resourceful place.

- Excel in customer service

- Engage in positive, proactive, and respectful communication from the time of enrollment, prior to the start of school, and periodically throughout the year

- Prepare staff to serve as resources to families by identifying and sharing community resources that may be offered to families who may be experiencing a crisis

- Have a trained professional follow up with families if needed

- Create a culture of transparency
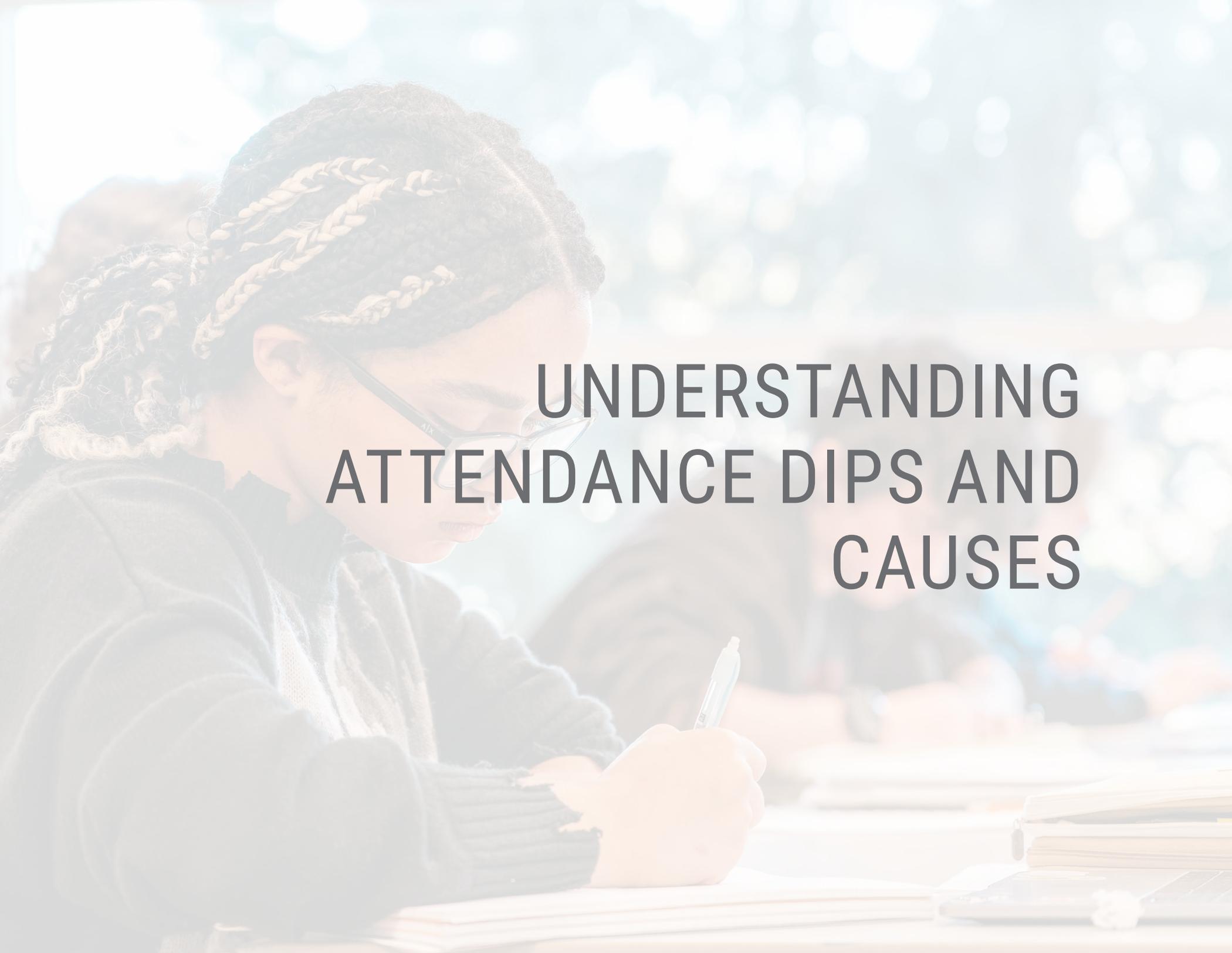
UNDERSTANDING ATTENDANCE DIPS AND CAUSES

What are Attendance Dips?

Drops in attendance are common during certain times of the year, particularly in the days leading up to breaks or holiday weekends; these drops are known as Attendance Dips. Student attendance holds a critical role in the educational journey of students. In this section, we will discuss why Attendance Dips happen and how Local Educational Agencies (LEA) can minimize the adverse effects of Attendance Dips. Additionally, we will explore how attendance impacts students' academic, social, and personal growth.

Understanding the root causes of student absences during the holiday season and breaks are essential for educators and parents to ensure students' academic success and well-being. It is also important to prepare for and offer suitable options and/or alternatives when absences are unavoidable. It is imperative, at the same time, to communicate to parents and caregivers early in the school year the importance of regular, on time attendance as a critical factor contributing to student connectedness, well-being, and academic growth.

Causes of Attendance Dips and Suggestions to Address Them

The following are a few common reasons for attendance dips:

- School Adjustment for Early Learners
- Family Travel and Foreseeable Absences
- Personal Reasons (Family Emergencies)
- Illness (Acute and Chronic)
- School Avoidance due to Bullying
- Weather-Related Issues

Addressing attendance is key to abolishing chronic absenteeism. PowerSchool recently wrote an article on strategies to prevent holiday absences. Additionally, the National League of Cities' Work website contains information on student reengagement as a means to prevent dips in attendance.

STRATEGIES TO PROACTIVELY ADDRESS ATTENDANCE DIPS

Encouraging Positive Attendance Habits for Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten Students

School attendance is crucial for students in Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and Kindergarten (K), as it lays the foundation for their educational journey. Young children are at a critical development stage where they acquire essential skills, socialize with peers, and build the fundamental knowledge that will shape their future academic success.

While it is true that students in this age group are not always subject to compulsory education laws due to their age (e.g., in California being younger than six years old), there are several reasons why early attendance remains vital:

- **Early Learning:** The early years are a prime time for cognitive and social development, and consistent attendance ensures that young learners benefit from structured, developmentally appropriate instruction.

- **Socialization:** School attendance fosters social interactions, helping children develop essential social and emotional skills that are foundational for later academic and life success.

- **Building Routines:** Regular attendance helps children establish routines and adapt to the school environment, setting the stage for a smoother transition to higher grade levels.

- **Academic Foundations:** TK and Kindergarten (K) provide the building blocks for reading, math, and other academic subjects, and consistent attendance is essential to acquire these foundational skills.

Additionally, regularly examining disaggregated data is crucial for identifying and addressing trends and patterns within specific student groups or grade levels. This includes recognizing the notable trend of disproportionate absenteeism among TK/K students, acknowledging the significance of these transitional years, and understanding the challenge many districts face in effectively engaging families during this critical period.

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Among Transitional Kindergarten and Kindergarten Students

Causes for school absences in TK and K can include adjustment and attachment related concerns, illness, family events, and childcare. Additionally, as these students are typically not bound by compulsory education laws, some parents and caregivers (and even school staff) may hold the misconception that attendance is less important for young children.

To address this misconception, schools can:

- **Inform/Empower Parents:** Schools should communicate the benefits of consistent attendance for early childhood development. Parents need to understand that regular school attendance plays a significant role in their child's growth and success.

- **Offer Support:** Schools can provide support and resources for parents who may be dealing with challenges related to attendance, such as transportation or childcare issues.

- [Foster Engagement:](#) Creating a positive and engaging learning environment for young children can make school more appealing to both students and parents, reinforcing the importance of regular attendance. Consider reaching out to families prior to the start of school to get to know each student. This will also help schools plan for any accommodation needed ahead of time.

Reconciling Absences for Personal Reasons and the Academic Impact

Families occasionally choose to take vacation during the school year, which can have a significant impact on attendance. Research demonstrates that post-pandemic, parents'/caregivers' beliefs about the value and importance of daily school attendance have declined. When students miss school for vacations, they not only miss out on valuable classroom instruction and social connectedness but may also struggle to catch up on missed coursework, potentially affecting their academic progress. It's essential for families to balance the value of vacations with the importance of consistent school attendance. By working together, schools and parents/caregivers can mitigate the impact of vacations on a child's education, helping them stay on track and succeed academically while still enjoying valuable family time.

Reconciling Absences for Personal Reasons and the Academic Impact

To address this matter and minimize the academic impact, consider the following strategies:

- **Independent Study:** Encourage parents to provide schools with advanced notice of planned vacations. This allows teachers to prepare assignments and make-up work, minimizing the disruption to the child's education, District staff need to mindful of short and long-term contract requirements for Independent Study.

- **Make-Up Work:** With proper notice, schools may provide students with make-up assignments or resources to complete while they are away, helping them stay on track academically.

- **Inform/Empower Parents:** Schools should inform parents about the potential impact of extended absences on their child's learning and sense of connection to school and classmates. Parents need to be aware of how missed instructional time can affect their child's progress and sense of community/belonging at school.

- **Attendance Policies:** Schools can establish clear attendance policies and procedures, outlining expectations and impacts of vacations during the school year. This can help parents make informed decisions.

- **Flexible Learning:** In some cases, schools can offer flexible learning options such as online access to classroom materials, allowing students to stay engaged with their studies while traveling.

- **Supportive Communication:** Maintain open lines of communication between schools and parents. This can help address concerns, provide resources, and ensure that students can transition back into the classroom smoothly after a vacation.

- **Collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between parents and teachers to create a plan for catching up on missed work and addressing any academic challenges that may arise.

## Independent Study Program Referral as an Option (Short-Term)

There are various reasons for a student's participation in independent study. Independent study should be offered if maintaining the existing learning schedule will cause the student to accumulate multiple absences, all day or partial day independent study should be presented to students and their caregivers.

A Short-Term Independent Study Agreement can be used when students will miss school three (3) or more consecutive days but not to exceed fourteen (14) days for reasons other than illness or injury. Short-term independent study allows Districts and families to mitigate and/or prevent the disruption of the students' academic progress.

District staff need to be mindful that days on independent study are cumulative. Once that student goes beyond 14 days, the requirements for long term independent study must be implemented.

More information on Independent Study could be found in LACOE's 2023-2024 ANNUAL NOTIFICATION
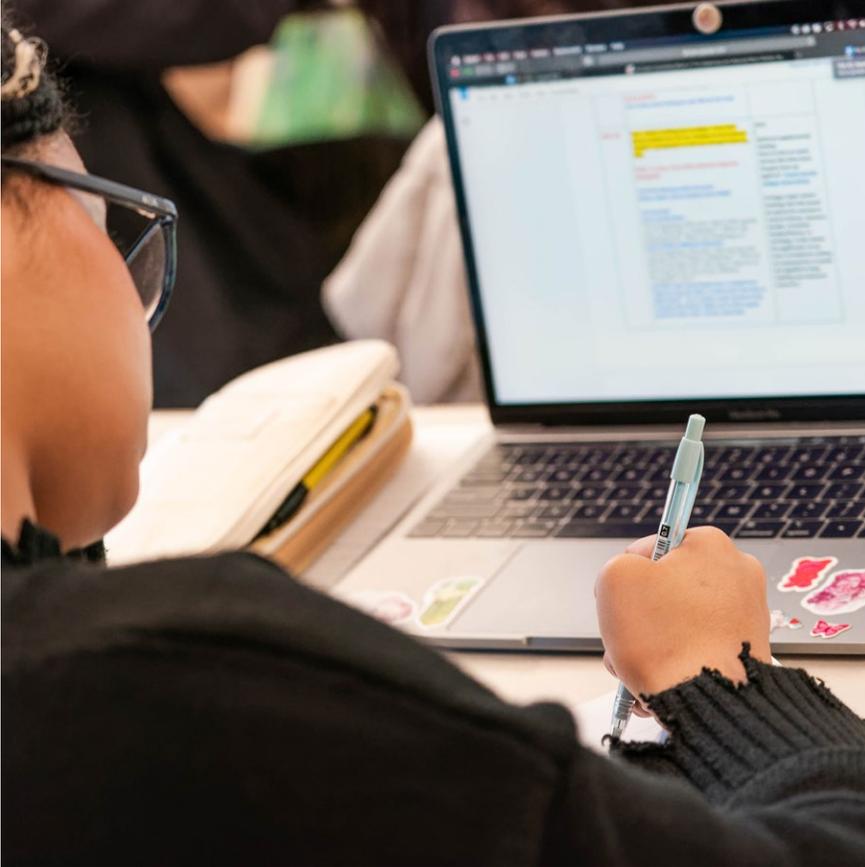
Considerations When Supporting Students with an Acute or Chronic Illness

An acute or chronic illness can significantly contribute to student absences, as affected students may experience ongoing health challenges that require medical treatment and recovery periods. These absences can have a substantial impact on a student's academic progress and overall well-being. To address this issue, schools can work collaboratively with families to ensure that arrangements are made to support the student's success in school.

Existing law requires each person subject to compulsory education to attend full-time school or continuation school. The Home and Hospital Instruction Program (California Education Code Section 48206.3) serves students who incur a temporary disability, which makes attendance in the regular day classes or alternative education program impossible or inadvisable. For more information on the Home and Hospital Instruction Program, please visit: https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/eo/hh/

Considerations When Supporting Students with an Acute or Chronic Illness

Below are some strategies to support students who may have an acute or chronic illness:

- **Medical Documentation:** It is essential for families to work with schools for the appropriate medical documentation to confirm the chronic illness and outline any specific care or treatment requirements. This helps schools better understand the nature and severity of the condition and how they can support families and educational continuity.

- **Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 Plans:** For students with chronic illnesses, schools can develop IEPs or 504 Plans that outline accommodations, such as modified assignments, extended deadlines, or Home and Hospital Instruction, if applicable, to address the unique needs of the student.

- **Communication:** Frequent communication between teachers, school staff, and parents is vital. Parents can inform the school in advance about potential absences, and teachers can share class materials and updates with the student to keep them engaged during periods of absence/their recovery.

- **Online Content/Learning:** In cases where in-person attendance is not possible due to chronic illness, schools can offer access to online or remote learning platforms to ensure the student continues to receive instruction and complete assignments.

Considerations When Supporting Students with an Acute or Chronic Illness

Below are some strategies to support students who may have an acute or chronic illness:

- **Tutoring and Support Services:** Schools can provide tutoring services or additional academic support to help students catch up on missed work and maintain their academic progress.

- **Home and Hospital Instruction:** If needed, a referral to the Home and Hospital Instruction Program can provide instruction to a student with a temporary disability in the student's home or in a hospital or other residential health facility, excluding state hospitals. The temporary disability does not include a disability for which a student is identified for special education services.

- **Peer Support:** Encouraging classmates to support and include the student with a chronic illness can contribute to their emotional well-being and a sense of belonging.

- **Flexibility:** Schools should be flexible in their approach, understanding that the student's health may fluctuate. This flexibility can include allowing for makeup work and accommodating the student's needs as they change over time.

These strategies help students maintain their academic progress and minimize the negative impact of chronic illness-related absences on their overall educational experience. The Attendance Works website contains an article that provides tips for families on partnering with health providers to reduce health-related absences. Additionally, the San Diego County Office of Education has compiled these resources and informational materials, addressing chronic illness, health, and attendance.

Preparing for Flu and COVID

In a post-COVID pandemic era, many education partners are unsure **when to send their students to school**. The messaging and expectations changed because of the unfamiliarity and contractibility of the virus in the height of the pandemic. Today, we are still in the recovery phase, and districts are watching the health of the community closely in the event adjustments must be made. **Here are two strategies that schools are using today to ensure their school community remains informed and safe.**

- Designating a district point of contact (POC) that is up to date on the COVID information

- Designing a system to communicate changes and updates to all educational stakeholders (Administrators, Schools, Faculty, Students, Families and Community)

Consider bookmarking the **Los Angeles County Department of Public Health's Educator Tool Kit** to stay up to date on current public health regulations and requirements.

Promoting Good Health and Hygiene

During the pandemic, the World joined in the promotion of good hygiene. Many gained a deeper awareness of how communicable diseases are contained or spread. The greater takeaway was that we witnessed systemic strategies to manage a global health crisis. The same framework and strategies can be used to manage both illnesses and chronic illnesses to maintain excellent attendance.

Educating, promoting, and practicing good hygiene became every community member's responsibility. In fact, it was hard to avoid signage or visual aids that promoted hand washing and face masks. We no longer were allowed to sneeze without everyone taking notice nor was it allowable to sneeze or cough without covering your mouth. The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness created a piece that illustrates how **health services can promote attendance.**

Bullying: The Impact on Student Attendance

Bullying is a serious issue that can have profound and lasting effects on students' well-being. It involves repeated aggressive behavior, intentional harm, and a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Bullying can take various forms, including verbal, physical, social, and cyberbullying. To create a safe and inclusive school environment, it's essential to address and prevent bullying, as well as to educate all school community members about this issue and to distinguish bullying behavior from developmentally appropriate interpersonal conflict.

Here are some essential tips to prevent bullying:

- **Educate Students:** Start with education. Teach students about what constitutes bullying, its impact on others, and the importance of preventing it.

- **Anti-Bullying Policies:** Schools should establish clear anti-bullying policies that outline expected behavior and consequences for bullying. Ensure that these policies are communicated to students, parents, and staff.

- **Peer Support Programs:** Implement peer support or mentoring programs where older students mentor younger ones. Positive peer relationships can discourage bullying.

- **Open Communication:** Create a culture of open and honest communication among students, staff, and parents. Encourage reporting of bullying incidents without fear of retaliation.

- **Cyberbullying Awareness:** Educate students about responsible online behavior and the consequences of cyberbullying. Encourage them to report any cyberbullying incidents.

- **Upstander Empowerment:** Train students to be active upstanders. Encourage them to practice strategies that support and protect themselves and one another, and to report bullying incidents. Upstanders play a crucial role in preventing bullying.

- **Fast Facts: Preventing Bullying:** For resources and information on bullying and bully prevention.

Tips to Support Anti-Bullying Efforts

Community and empathy building: Consistent positive and engaging community building activities support all students and adults on campus to get to know and connect with one another, encouraging pro-social and accountable behavior.

Application of Consequences: Enforce consequences for bullying behavior consistently and fairly. This sends a message that bullying will not be tolerated.

Mental Health Support: Recognize that both students who engage in these behaviors, and those they target may need emotional support. Provide access to counseling and mental health services for those affected by bullying.

Parent Involvement: Involve parents in anti-bullying efforts. Provide resources and information on recognizing and preventing bullying. Encourage them to reinforce pro-social behavior and communicate with the school if they suspect their child is involved in or aware of bullying behaviors.

Creating a Plan for Bullying

LEAs should take steps to develop a [bullying prevention plan.](#) Additionally, it is important to be trained to recognize the signs of bullying, whether it's physical, verbal, social, or cyberbullying. If bullying is happening, it's important to create a bullying prevention [policy](#).

Here are some key bullying resources to support your efforts:

- [Bullying Prevention at School](#)
- [Bullying Strategies that Work](#)
- [Bullying How to Stop on the Spot](#)
- [Bullying Prevention Tips and Guidance](#)

Essential Activities to Support Student Wellness

As the semester ends, LEAs begin to administer exams and assessments. This can be a particularly stressful time of the year for students causing attendance dips as students may experience pressure and anxiety when faced with challenging tasks. Additionally, with the colder weather and shorter days, our energy level and engagement may be impacted.

Consider incorporating the following Wellness Activities:

- Establishing a Fitness Routine for Physical and Mental Well-being
- Scheduling and taking Mental Breaks
- Engaging in Mindfulness Activities
- Practicing Breathing Techniques and Exercises
- Visualization Exercises
- Yoga /Stretch / Stress Reduction Classes
- For more information on student wellness activities, please visit LACOE Student Wellness Online Module
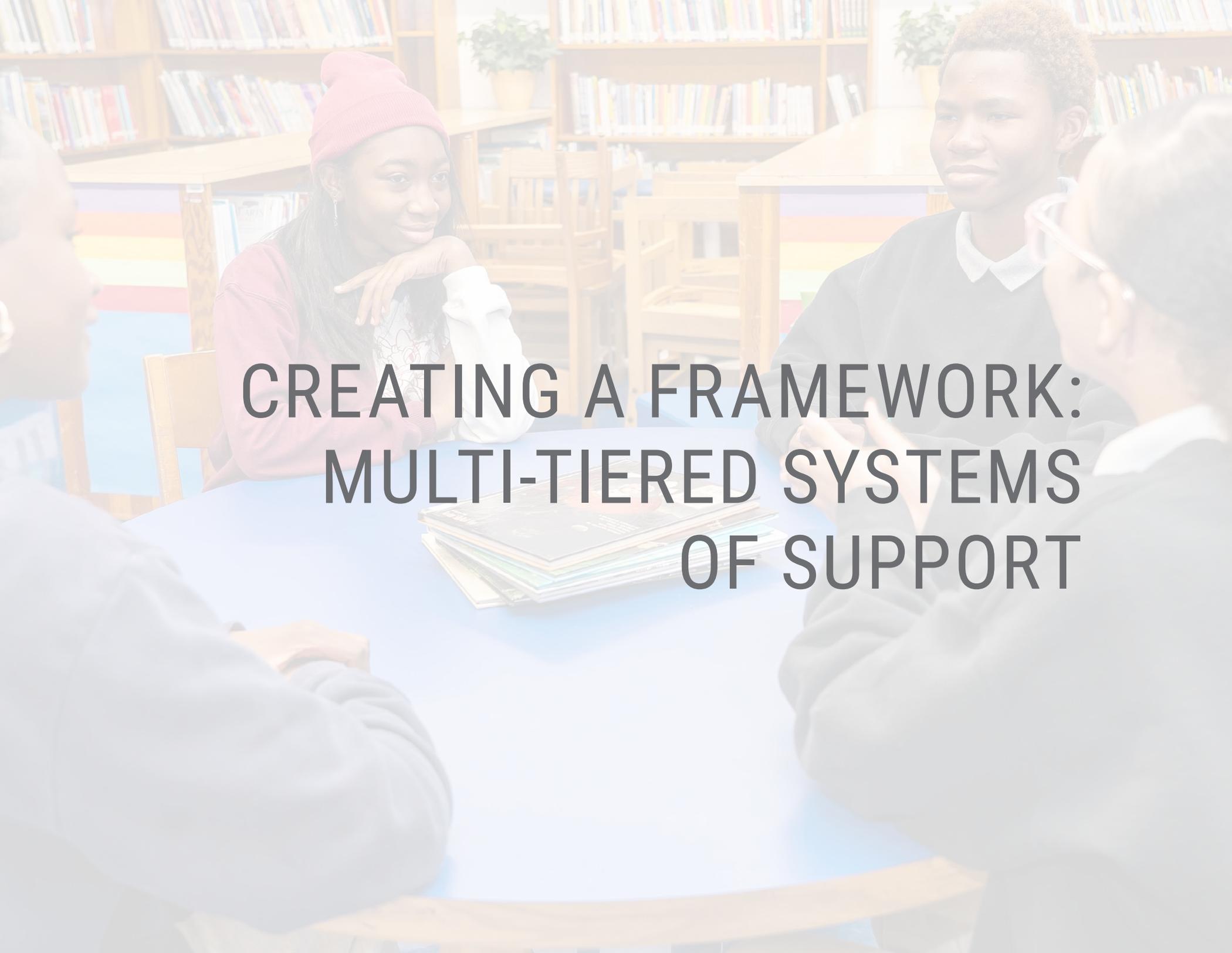
CREATING A FRAMEWORK: MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

Tier II and III Support for Identified Students

At the mid-point of the academic year, it is generally clear which students are struggling with chronic absence and likely to end the year being chronically absent (missing 10% or more of their enrolled time). It is essential to act quickly and methodically. In addition to school-wide attendance teams that design and implement tiered supports with a focus on Tier I (Universal) strategies for all students. Tier II (Targeted) strategies to consider may be the Coordination of Services Teams (COST) and Student Success Teams (SST). COST and SST can be used for students who require Tier II and III support and intervention.

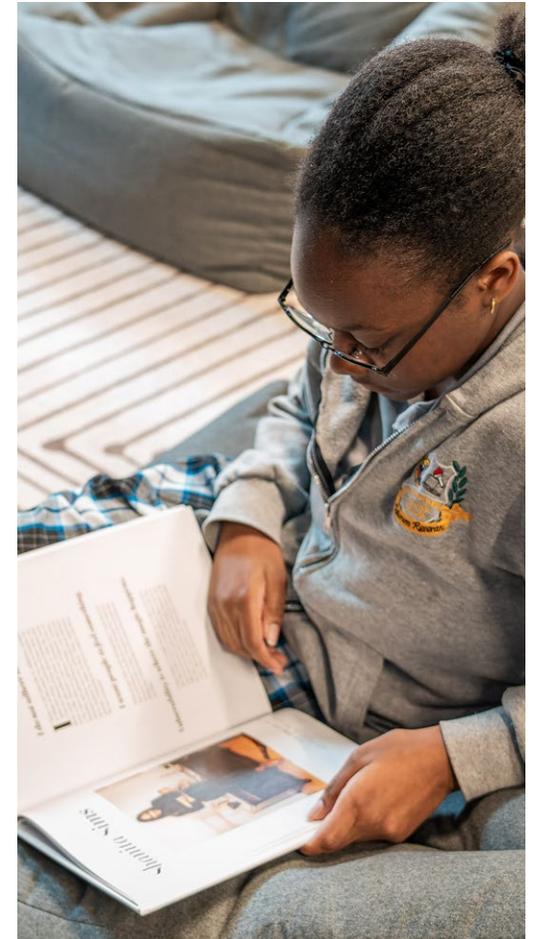**Coordination of Services Teams (COST)** is a proven strategy to coordinate services, identify support services and provide resources for students. COST consists of a multidisciplinary team created to regularly meet and discuss students' progress.

Additional benefits of COST teams include:

- Allocation of proper resources
- Coordination of staff and customized interventions
- Minimization of duplication of service
- Ensures services and supports are equitable

COST participants include the following:

• Site administrators • Counselors • Community partners • Special Education staff • Afterschool Program staff • Parent/Family Support staff • Attendance staff • Nurse/Health office staff

Tier II and III Supports

Student Success Teams (SST) consists of adults to help create a personalized, strengths-based plan that may include support and interventions to ensure each student's academic success. The SST committee should reconvene to examine the effectiveness of interventions, if interventions were done with fidelity, and determine if any adjustments are necessary.

During the SST meeting, discussions customarily center around one student and solicit feedback from the student and parent/guardian to implement strategies to improve student progress.

Here is a sample of an SST agenda template that you can use as a guide.

Below is a more detailed list of participants:

• Site administrators • Teachers • Student's support providers • Student's parent(s)/caregiver(s) • Student (depending on age)

Tier II and III Supports

Below are some comparisons regarding differences in the implementation and purpose of COST and SST meetings.

COST vs SST

| Coordination of Services Team	Student Success Team
Purpose	**Purpose**
A multidisciplinary team of adults work collaboratively to • triage referrals for student support services and assess student support needs • develop and monitor coordinated interventions and supports at the student/site level • facilitate communication between school staff and providers in order to link students/families with supports	A group of adults, responsible for the success of an individual student, work collaboratively to: • develop a strength-based plan • provide academic, social-emotional, and behavioral support and interventions • support the student to achieve educational success
Participants	**Participants**
• Site administrators • Counselors • Community partners • Special Education staff • Afterschool Program staff • Parent Support staff • Attendance staff • Nurse	• Site administrators • Teachers • Student's support providers • Student's parents • Student (depending on age)
Timelines	**Timelines**
Next COST meeting, revisit referrals made.	Every 6 to 18 weeks, reconvene ST team to review success of interventions/supports.
For Who	**For Who**
Collaborate and coordinate services across the school site for all students.	Collaborate and coordinate supports and interventions for an individual student.
Numbers	**Numbers**
Multiple students per COST	One student per SST

Effective Tier II and III Interventions: Home Visits to Connect and Assess

As LEAs invest in relationship building it is important for school staff to be seen not only on campus but in the community. Research shows, when districts see a dip in attendance it is imperative that expeditious outreach efforts are made to recover students. The sooner the outreach attempts are made, the less likely students are to disengage completely from school.

Home visits are a mechanism to assess student need and may be utilized as a check-in process to re-engage students and families. Home visits are also an opportunity to empathize and connect with families.

LEAs should consider the following:

- Routinely (monthly) provide outreach in the community to re-engage students and parents/guardians/caregivers

- At minimum, outreach should take place before and after a school break (e.g., before school starts, Thanksgiving, winter and spring break, etc.)

- Outreach should include a diverse school team (site administrators, teachers, counselors, support services staff, etc.)
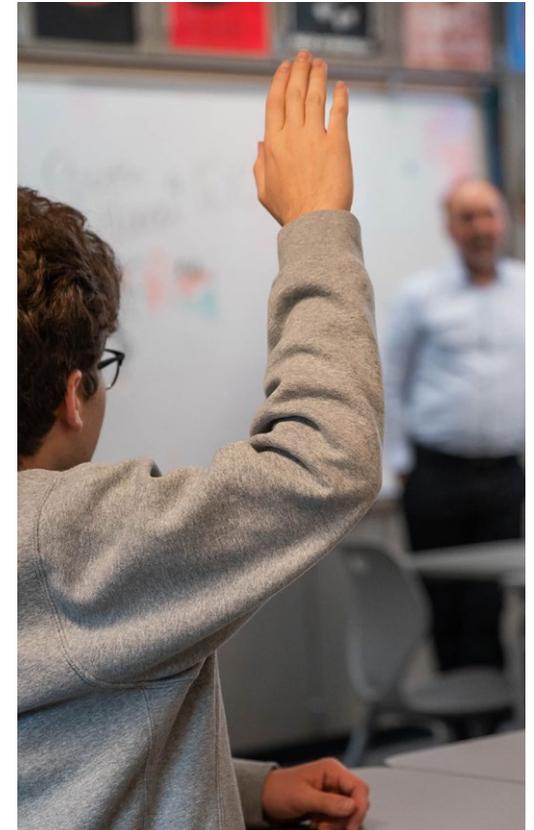
Effective Tier II and III Interventions: Home Visits to Connect and Assess

There are many opportunities to engage with the community when doing outreach. It is recommended that individuals have an outreach toolkit with the following items:

- School schedule
- Program flyers and information
- Calling card/Door hanger
- School contact information (pertinent names, phone numbers, and email addresses)
- Referrals as needed
- Phone list of district support services and community resources